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The  
Historic Rôle *of* France  
Among the Nations

An Address

*Delivered at the University of Chicago  
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APPENDIX 40. VIII  
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## THE HISTORIC RÔLE *of* FRANCE AMONG THE NATIONS<sup>1</sup>

It seems to me very probable that those who invited a historian and a professor of history to address you today expected him to make history his theme. Not, perhaps, that I should choose a topic from my own special field of study, which is too technical, but rather one of those large subjects which historians, whatever the nature of their investigations, are not at liberty to ignore — such subjects being the final end and justification of all historical investigation.

The philosophy of French history is surely a subject of this kind, for the ultimate object of all labor on the history of a nation is to determine that nation's present position and the direction in which it is moving. Your presence here proves your interest in all that concerns France; it cannot, therefore, be a matter of indifference to you to learn how this serious problem of detecting the real trend of French history appears to modern Frenchmen who

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Associate Professor T. Atkinson Jenkins, of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures. Reprinted from the *University Record*, Vol. IX, No. 10.

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think about these things. Of course, such a subject is too vast to be taken in at a glance; moreover, to treat it before foreigners is, for a Frenchman, a task of extreme delicacy. Conscious, however, of bringing to the task of outlining the philosophy of French history, if not the requisite abilities, at least an absolute sincerity, I shall make the attempt.

First of all, do not be alarmed: I shall not go back to the deluge. The territory now called France has been peopled by many races since the epoch when, the distribution of climate being different from that now prevailing, men hunted there the elephant and the mastodon. Modern anthropologists exhume the bones of these prehistoric men, and upon them build speculations which have, to be sure, some value, but not for our present purpose. The first of these primitive peoples to hand down its name to us—the Celtic people, or perhaps I should say the Celtic aristocracy, the Gauls—flourished two thousand years ago. Gaul was conquered by Rome and profoundly Romanized; it became one of the main centers of Roman civilization and shared in the general destiny of the Roman world; for Roman civilization

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was modified in Gaul, as elsewhere, during the early centuries of our era by the success of the Judæo-Christian movement and by the advent of the barbarians. These invaders, mostly of Germanic race, took up their abode in Gaul as in other parts of *Romania*. Then follows in Gaul, as elsewhere, among the ruins of the Roman structure, a long period of turmoil and readjustment, out of which emerges the feudal system—that is, a system in which, under a royal authority more or less nominal, the various seigniories lie side by side or interpenetrate, while under each feudal chief are groups of retainers and subjects. From our present point of view, this is all that we need to know of the history of the regions which are now called France.

Not but that frequent attempts have been made to seek the beginning of a French national tradition in these remote times. Some modern historians, examining what the Roman writers say of the Gauls conquered by Cæsar, have thought they succeeded in detecting in them some of the traits which belong to Frenchmen of our own day. According to these historians, the Romans observed in our ancestors that nervous mobility, the spirit of quick sympathy

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and of sociability, vivacity, impetuosity, generosity, the liking for eloquence and partiality for the "point of honor," as well as the vanity and general frivolousness which are still commonly ascribed to the French character. I find, for example, in recent books by reputable authors, statements like these: "As for sensitiveness to impressions, we are still the excitable nation spoken of by Strabo;" and: "The exercise of the will among the French people has always been explosive, centrifugal, and direct, as it was among the Gauls" (Fouillée). These analogies run into even greater detail, and from the descriptions which Valerius Maximus and Diodorus give of the funeral ceremonies of the Gauls, and from the fact that modern Parisians remove their hats on the passing of a funeral procession and visit the cemeteries on November 2, the conclusion has been drawn that "the cult for the dead, intenser perhaps and certainly more lasting among the Gauls than in the cities of the classic world, was destined to remain one of the strongest feelings of our nation. We would fain be sociable and affectionate even beyond the tomb." These writers are of a school with those who cannot describe the struggle of Vercingetorix against Rome without feeling a

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sort of retrospective patriotism, and for whom Rome is still the enemy. Henri Martin, an historian much read during the period from 1850 to 1870, represents this state of mind, peculiar as it seems to us today.

Still other writers have attempted to settle the respective contributions of Rome, of the Gallo-Romans, and of the Frankish invaders to the formation of the French people. Thus, the Germanists maintain that the rule of the barbarians regenerated the decrepit world, and that the invaders brought with them certain virtues, and certain original institutions which were the outgrowth of these virtues. The Romanists, of whom M. Fustel de Coulanges is the most prominent, assert that the Germans, being few in numbers, were at once swallowed up in the surrounding populations, and that things went on nearly the same as before. If we believe certain historians, the feudal system in France was a product of the Germanic spirit of liberty and companionship in arms, which acted like a leaven upon a society already fallen into decline. According to others, the feudal system, a phenomenon not peculiar to mediæval France nor even to mediæval Europe, is the product of causes analogous to those which have called it

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into existence in very different environments, for example in Japan.

A feudal system arose in Frankish Gaul, as elsewhere, at the time when the central authority, in this case of Roman origin, became powerless to maintain order and safety of person and property. Other guarantees were necessary, and they were found, instinctively, in the relation of lord and vassal existing in outline already in the Roman *clientèle* as well as in the "companionship" of the barbarians.

Probably the commonest conclusion drawn from these conflicting views is that it is a matter of extreme difficulty to sift out, when dealing with these remote times, what is peculiar to the genius of the particular race, and what are merely *processus* common to all societies placed under the same conditions. After all, what is the "genius" of a race? An abstraction, perhaps—merely a word with which we allow ourselves to be satisfied, but which may correspond to nothing real and definite. In any case, the Celtic genius of the Gauls, the Germanic genius of the Franks—without reckoning in the nameless genius of those ancient elephant-hunters who have left us nothing but their bones—all these geniuses are now, and have

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long since been, so completely fused in the French character that to try to separate them would indeed be a desperate undertaking. As well pretend to discern in a river the waters of its tributaries. Let us therefore refrain entirely from discussions of this kind.

The only primitive element whose influence has certainly been continuous in our history is, not the tie of blood, but the tradition of Rome. First of all, the Roman tongue. The population of ancient Roman Gaul spoke *Romance*; the number of Celtic words in the Romance dialects of this region is quite insignificant, and the number of Germanic words not large. Districts like those parts of Britany where Breton is spoken, or of Flanders where Flemish is the vernacular, are frontier zones colonized by Celts or Germans at comparatively recent dates. First of all, then, the mother-tongue; second, for the cultivated classes, the idea, the memory, and the regretful admiration of a stable government, of political unity, of peace and a superior civilization—in a word, an ideal. This ideal, preserved by the church, which was admirably constituted for the purpose, more than once powerfully influenced the course of events in France.

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The Roman ideal, fresh and recent in men's minds, was influential, for example, at the time of the restoration of the Western Empire in the year 800. Charlemagne, king of the Franks (both of Gaul and Germany), believed he was reviving the Roman Empire with the co-operation of the pope; but this artificial restoration crumbled away in the ninth century. In that century the sons of Charlemagne's son divided up the new empire. Henceforward there was a king of the western Franks (Gaul), and a king of the eastern Franks (Germany). Between lay a long strip of territory bounded by the Scheldt, the Meuse, and the Rhone on the one side, and by the Rhine and the Alps on the other — the inheritance of Lothaire. These were the earliest outlines of France and Germany, and here lay their future field of conflict.

The Roman ideal was actively influential a second time, at the end of the tenth century, in the western Frankish kingdom now called France. The king, the heir in this region of the Carolingian emperors and consequently of the imperial tradition, was at first only a shadow; for the inner processes of feudal disintegration and reorganization which had been working gradually for centuries ceased with



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the period of Carolingian decadence. The Frankish king was at first weak indeed, being very poor. But in 987 it came to pass that the royal dignity fell to one of the most powerful feudal chiefs of the whole region, the ancestor of the Capetian line. From this time on, the tradition of authority as Rome understood it, which in theory had never once lapsed, became once again, in hands able to enforce respect for it, a living force. Instinctively the Capetian kings made attempts to exercise the ancient inalienable rights of their throne. They labored hard, without definite plan and foresight, and without at first realizing clearly the nature of the work which they were to accomplish, to undermine in their kingdom the foundations of the feudal system, a system turbulent and restless, and to substitute a stable government—in a word, the unity and peace of Rome. The evolution thus begun in the eleventh century in France, under the leadership of the Capetians, is therefore exactly parallel—though moving in the opposite direction—to the evolution dating from the barbarian invasions; for it tends to reconstitute, within the limited boundaries of a detached section of *Romania*, a state more or less after the ancient conception of the state;

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that is, an organized political being or entity, centralized after the manner of living beings.

For hundreds of years after the eleventh century the struggle of royalty against the feudal powers of the French territory, and for the unification of the whole region, forms the basis of French history. This struggle might have ended in defeat. Not all the early Capetians were princes of great merit—far from it; but, as luck would have it, they succeeded one another from father to son without disastrous interregnums and without quarrels over divisions of the inheritance. They made incredible mistakes; such, for example, as allowing the king of England who already owned, as heir of the ancient dukes of Normandy, several great continental fiefs, to acquire by marriage the whole southwest of France. But, again as luck would have it, at the most critical moment, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, the French monarch Philippe Auguste was a man of ability and energy, while his principal antagonist, John Lackland, king of England, was a most contemptible fellow. After Philippe Auguste, who captured from John Normandy, Anjou, Maine, and Poitou, and witnessed the political ruin of south France brought about (to the profit of

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north France) by the crusade against the Albigenses, the work was done: it was decided that there should be one France — not two, Languedoc and Languedoc, nor more than two — and that the “France of the King” should little by little swallow up the whole of the French territory. The work of Philippe Auguste was not, of course, done in a day; scores of years and streams of blood were needed to smother the independence asserted by Brittany and Flanders, and by what was left of other feudal powers, and especially to wrest the southwest from the English. But finally, through indescribable sufferings, France emerges. From the thirteenth century onward, and especially after the Hundred Years’ War, France is indisputably a state, and the leading state in Europe.

She is the first in date on the continent; for as yet there is no Germany. The kingdom of the eastern Franks, whose head vainly made use of the Carolingian title of emperor, remains in a state of anarchy. There is as yet no Italy; and the pope continues to carefully look after that matter. There is as yet no Spain.

She is the first in power; for France’s only rival, the England of that day, has the mortal enmity of the Scotch, of the Irish, and of the

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Welsh, and is neither so large, nor so populous, nor so wealthy, nor so triumphantly active as France. England is confined in a part of a northern island, while the name, the language, the men and things of France have overflowed the known world. The expansion of France, one of the most striking phenomena of mediæval history, began very early, much before Capetian policy had brought about a unified France. French Normans took England from the Anglo-Saxons, and southern Italy and Sicily from the Greeks and the Saracens. Several of the crusades were French expeditions, and a majority of the Christian principalities of the East—the kingdom of Jerusalem, the Latin empire of Constantinople, the dukedom of Athens, etc.—were founded and governed by French knights.

Nor is this all. For reasons which it is, of course, extremely difficult to specify, there occurred, in this formative period from the eleventh century onward, a remarkable outburst of artistic effort in all directions. Of all the vernacular literatures of the Middle Ages the French is the most original, the most pleasing, and the only literature which exercised a universal influence. In its day it was known and imitated everywhere within the confines of

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Christianity. French was understood by cultivated people, not only in England, where the Norman dialect was for a long time the official language, but also in imperial territories (the Netherlands, the Rhine countries, etc.), in Italy, and in the East. Foreigners took a hand in writing in French, or in Provençal, and succeeded very well. It is well understood that certain French poems of the Middle Ages, whose originals are lost, are preserved only in translations or adaptations in German, Anglo-Saxon, Dutch, Norwegian, Icelandic, Italian, and Greek. The "courtly" ideal of French aristocratic society of the twelfth century was adopted by the upper classes of all Europe. In the matter of the arts of architecture and decoration, the French styles—the "Cistercian," and especially the "Gothic," which is the most characteristically French of all styles and whose earliest attempts are to be seen in the immediate neighborhood of Paris—were not at all confined to France. Modern archæologists have drawn up the long catalogue of mediæval monuments built beyond the French borders by Frenchmen, or in imitation of French models; they are found everywhere—in Castile, Bohemia, Hungary, and Palestine. Village churches in Cyprus

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have an astonishing resemblance to those of our own villages in the departments of the Oise and Seine-et-Oise. Moreover, numerous texts bear evidence that French fashions and manufactures in matters of costume and care of the person were received outside of France with no less favor than French art and literature. In a word, mediæval civilization—or, at the very least, the refined evidences of civilization—had in all Christian countries a French coloring.

One more consideration. During this period it was to the schools at Paris that the most gifted clerics of all nationalities came to finish their studies in literature and theology. From the tenth century on, Paris is the intellectual capital of Europe. A current saying was that the world was governed by three powers: the Papacy, the Empire, and Learning. The first resided at Rome, the second in Germany, and the third at Paris. Another common saying, quoted by Chrétien de Troyes in the prologue to his *Cligès*, and certainly repeated long before him, was to the effect that Learning (*clergie*) and Military Power (*chevalerie*), after dwelling for a time in Greece and next in Rome, were now settled in France, whence, it was to be hoped, they would never depart:

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Puis vint Chevalerie a Rome  
Et de la Clergie la somē,  
Qui or est en France venue.  
Dieu doint qu'ele i soit retenue  
Et que li leus li abelisse  
Tant que jamais de France n'isse  
L'enors qui s'i est arestee.<sup>1</sup>

A list has been drawn up of well-known men of the thirteenth century, and later, who belonged to the University of Paris either as teachers or as students; the greatest names in the history of the church and of mediæval thought are found in this list. We may note, to be sure, that the greatest names are not French names: Albert, a German; St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas, Italians; Roger Bacon and Duns Scotus, Englishmen, etc. But what of that? The fact remains that the reputation of France in science, some six or seven hundred years ago, was as great as its renown in art and literature and in material achievement.

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<sup>1</sup> Then Knighthood came to Rome,  
Along with the sum of Knowledge,  
Which now has come into France:  
God grant that she be kept here,  
And that the place so content her  
That never again shall leave France  
The honor which has settled there.

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Here, then, is the main fact. At a certain moment in mediæval times, France, thanks to the advantages of her geographical position, to the abilities of her people, and to other circumstances (chance no doubt must be credited with something) — France was historically far in advance of all other countries, and from all points of view. In modern times the benefits of this leadership have been gradually lost, and more or less completely so. Why? How? These two serious and difficult questions now call for an answer.

If we ask ourselves, today, how the affairs of France ought to have been guided so as to secure permanently the advantages of leadership, the answer seems plain. There were required, first, such an administrative organization of the country as would render her total military and financial strength constantly available; second, a systematic annexation of the northern and eastern provinces belonging to the ancient inheritance of Lothaire — provinces which, thanks to German anarchy, were still hesitating between France and Germany — as a preparation for the inevitable time when rival states should appear on the European continent;



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and third, that France, when the discovery of new continents had wonderfully enlarged the horizons of human activity, ought to have foreseen that the future belonged to those European peoples which should "swarm over seas," and that the forces of national expansion were to be guided accordingly.

To reproach the French kings for not having conceived this political program, and especially its third article, would doubtless be absurd. Moreover, it is certain that the first two articles, relatively easy of conception, were not so easy of execution as one at this distance might imagine. And yet, allowance being made for obstacles arising from unfavorable circumstances, we are justified in saying that France has suffered cruelly, since the beginning of modern times, from the incapacity of those who have governed the country. Nearly all of her rulers shamefully neglected opportunities and made endless mistakes. Other states — Prussia, for example — have plainly owed their greatness to the prudent and persevering policies of a succession of intelligent kings. France, for her part, was more often than not ruled by narrow-minded men of very ordinary ability. Two exceptions may be cited — Henry IV. and Cardinal Richelieu; but that is all.

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The first article—that concerning interior policy—needs no extended comment. The old French monarchy, even under Louis XIV., never managed its finances well, nor, as a consequence, did it ever command armies at all comparable, for instance, to those of Frederick II. of Prussia. Nor did France ever have a solid administrative framework; consequently the state benefitted by only a small percentage of the national strength.

The opportunity to annex without much trouble the best parts of Lothaire's territories was lost by the end of the mediæval period. The kings of the house of Valois were so little alive to their duties toward the country that they handed over to their younger sons whole provinces, thus setting up once more the ancient feudal arrangement which the early Capetians had labored so hard to destroy. One of these younger sons founded, in the fourteenth century, the great house of Burgundy, which, by a series of conquests and family unions, added to its French domains the imperial Netherlands and almost all the northern part of ancient Lotharingia—a great but fragile power, of too rapid growth. Louis XI. shattered it, but he did not succeed in taking real possession of

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all the fragments. He was not in a position to prevent the daughter of Charles the Bold from carrying over by her marriage the imperial territories of Burgundy to the house of Austria. Truly, a disastrous marriage and one fraught with incalculable consequences! To crown these misfortunes, the son of this marriage married the heiress of Spain—Spain which, by the union of Castile and Aragon, had just been raised to the rank of a first-class power. Thenceforward, to conquer the Low Countries, France must enter into conflict with Germany and Spain in coalition. This was much to undertake; in fact, too much. The immediate successors of Louis XI. preferred to waste time in leading romantic expeditions into Italy, with the result that French blood was spilled for fifty years in that country, to no appreciable effect—for the mere pleasure of it. When this insanity was over, it was getting late, for the Reformation had started the civil wars and aroused new forces in every direction. France at last, on the proper field, entered upon the fight with Spain and Spain's allies. She won very slowly, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of the Lotharingian provinces: Alsace, Franche-Comté, Lorraine; but none from the Nether-

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lands. The pride of Louis XIV., excited to a ridiculous height by his too easy victories over moribund Spain, availed nothing against the patriotic energy of the United Provinces of Holland, which had become free and Protestant. In a word, three and a half centuries after the end of the Middle Ages France is hardly any larger than she was under Charles VII., although not a decade has gone by without seeing frightful hecatombs of human lives ; and around about her, formidable states have grown up, limiting her and watching her. No, assuredly not — the second article of the program was not carried out as it ought to have been.

What shall be said of the third? Did France, who in mediæval times had colonies in the East and in southern Italy, and whose maritime populations were noted for their adventurous spirit — Normans, Bretons, Basques, Provençals — did France secure her legitimate part of the new continents, repositories of virgin wealth and future cradles of the human race? There is not the least doubt that if the royal government had been capable of a settled policy in this matter, great things would have been possible. France of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries was full of people who

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would have been glad to set out, as they said then, "for the islands;" "they took their hats and set out for the islands"—this was the current phrase. But in high places there was very little effort made to smooth their way. Nevertheless there arose spontaneously, or nearly so, more than one New France beyond the seas—in the islands of the Indian ocean, in Hindustan, in the Antilles, in North America (the St. Lawrence Valley, the region of the Great Lakes, the Mississippi Valley). But France was unable to utilize, as England did, her civil and religious discords to propagate her race. The Huguenots, driven out of France, did not take ship on some "Mayflower" and found elsewhere a New France; the royal government would not have permitted them to live, even in the far ends of the earth, under the *fleurs-de-lis*. They were scattered in England, Holland, Prussia, Switzerland, and elsewhere, where they quickly gave up their nationality—a dead loss to the French nation. What could we expect? The royal government, absorbed in its European wars, its eyes fixed on the classic battlegrounds of Flanders and Italy, felt not the slightest interest in the French empire born beyond the seas, and made foolish use of it as small change for ob-

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taining concessions. The decisive episode in the history of the modern world belongs to the eighteenth century; it is the abdication of France, in favor of England, as a colonial power and as the mother-hive of nations. England then began in its turn an enormous advance, the effects of which in all probability will be prolonged indefinitely through the ages to come.

In spite of this, France continued, up to the end of this period (to 1789), to keep the first rank among civilized states. We must not forget that under Louis XIV. the population of France alone still represented 40 per cent. of the total of the great powers of Europe. The costly mistakes of Louis XV. in colonial matters were hardly noticed at the time, and only much later were their effects seen. Finally, in all that did not depend directly on the government, as in letters, art, and science, France had easily maintained her supremacy. Of course, in even these fields she is no longer without rivals. Italy has had her day in the Renaissance; the France of Henry IV. and of Louis XIV. has no one to counterbalance Shakspeare on the one hand, or Velasquez and Rembrandt on the other; England and Germany, with Newton and Leibnitz, inaugurate gloriously their work in science and

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philosophy. But France remains the *sensorium commune* of thinking Europe, and still sets the fashion. Learned men of all countries have not ceased to use French as a medium of communication, while Frenchmen continue in contented ignorance of any language but their own. In the eighteenth century the *style Pompadour* and the philosophy of the encyclopedists were in their day the style and the philosophy of the civilized world: of the king of Prussia and the German princes, of the empress of Russia and the Swedish aristocracy, of all-powerful statesmen in Spain, Portugal, Tuscany, and elsewhere. Proofs need not be cited; no one can dispute the fact that France was looked upon in the eighteenth century as a second fatherland, the intellectual home of all educated men. This was true of those who smiled at her weaknesses, and even of those who disliked France or detested her.

At this time (1789), one hundred and fifteen years ago, occurred an accident which profoundly disturbed the course of European history. All that seemed accomplished by the evolution of the preceding centuries was suddenly called in question once more by the French Revolution.

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The French Revolution means France rid of the government which had always failed to utilize her maximum strength and so to profit by her historical advance as to secure for her an unassailable position of leadership. The Revolution means France mistress of her destiny for the first time, her strength multiplied tenfold by glowing and generous passions. Monarchical Europe, united against her, attempts to crush her under its weight, but without success. Then she takes the offensive against Europe, in the rôle of emancipator of peoples. Henceforward it is not a question of whether or not France shall get the Low Countries and the Rhine as a frontier. All that the ancient monarchy had been scheming for in vain during three hundred years was gained at the first stroke, and more besides. But her momentum carried France farther. Would she, could she check herself? Had she stopped in time, the ill effects of ancient blunders might have been counteracted. Everything was still possible. This was one hundred and ten years ago; let us see what happened.

It was in the nature of things that soon the old instinct for rule and conquest should be mingled, in the revolutionary consciousness,



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with the thought of freeing other peoples. This spirit may, in fact, be observed as early as 1792. It was therefore infinitely probable that sooner or later the strength of France, magnified by the Revolution, should be appropriated and put to use by some general favored by fortune, to forward his own selfish enterprises. But this general might have been a moderate, prudent, and sensible man. If only he had been a born Frenchman! But the place was taken by Napoleon, by a captain, Italian by blood and education, a foreigner to our traditional views and opinions, a man haunted by colossal chimeras, and one whose head had been turned by his amazing success. He made use of France, and of all the nations that revolutionary France had already annexed or allied, as instruments wherewith to build an empire like that of Rome, and to embody in his person Alexander and Cæsar. And here, we may note by the way, is the third crisis when the memories of imperial Rome strongly affected the course of French history. Possessed of this weapon, the most formidable ever wielded by the hand of man, Napoleon trampled with horrible violence upon all that opposed his dreams, regardless of the harvests of hatred which he was thus preparing. He was allowed,

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as you know, to walk for ten years in his waking dream; to enter as master Vienna and Berlin, Madrid and Moscow. The French empire reached from the North Sea to the regions beyond the Adriatic; it was surrounded by vassal principalities ruled over by members of the imperial family. We are filled with amazement that such a paradox, the bare idea of which would have seemed so supremely absurd to Voltaire and his contemporaries, should thus have been realized.

Later, the day dawned for the inevitable breaking-up, and France suffered once more for having leaders careless of her interests and of their own duties. With his old-fashioned ambitions all directed toward the Mediterranean countries of Europe and Asia as a center, Napoleon at the zenith of his career was as powerless as Louis XV. to discern the fast-increasing importance of the great territories of the New World; he carelessly let slip from his grasp Louisiana and the Mississippi Valley—a third part and the very heart of the United States—just as formerly Louis XV. let go the valley of the St. Lawrence. Thus he finally destroyed the work of the French pioneers of North America. To offset this, he thought he had conquered Europe. But he had not taken into considera-

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tion the facts that the strength of France was not unlimited, and that the sympathy awakened for revolutionary France would at last turn against Napoleonic France, whose brutal domination was justified by no ideal. He took no account of the energies developed among the most inoffensive peoples by the harsh manner in which he treated them. In his most prosperous years he never succeeded in overcoming English tenacity; defeated in Spain and Russia, Germany, after her prostration at his hands, rose and overwhelmed him. After Waterloo he coolly washed his hands and departed, leaving France more contracted than she had been on the eve of the Revolution, bled to exhaustion, her revolutionary aureole gone, surrounded on all sides by new or rejuvenated states whose desire for vengeance was far from being satisfied by his downfall.

The history of France in the nineteenth century, which at first sight seems rather confused, unfolds quite logically when, to consider it, we place ourselves at the right point of view. We may explain it thus: France, when hardly recovered from the Napoleonic disasters, tried again to carry through the revolution, the first

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attempt at which had turned out so badly. The history of France in the nineteenth century is the history of a great effort to restore and re-apply the principles of the French Revolution. There were counter-strokes and reactions, which give an impression of incoherence; but if we look closer, we see that the effort has always been made in the same direction—anti-monarchical, democratic, and secular.

The first attempt was in 1830. But this was too soon; the ~~rev~~olution of 1830 was quickly side-tracked by the liberal bourgeoisie for their own advantage. At this time, nevertheless, France won back the sympathies of some of the oppressed nations and democratic parties whose good-will, proffered in 1790, had been lost to the nation through Napoleon.

The second attempt was in 1848. But the time even yet had not come. The revolution of 1848 traversed in a few months the arc which the revolution of 1789 had taken fifteen years to describe. Hardly cured by bitter experience of her liking for "the emperor" who had deluged her with "glory," France accepted, in memory of Napoleon, a restoration of the empire. This new Napoleon said: "The empire means peace," but he made war. There were

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popular wars, quite in the spirit of revolutionary traditions, as, for example, that which brought about the creation of a kingdom of Italy ; but he conducted the war in such a way that the new Italian state could believe itself, and of course did believe itself, under no obligation of gratitude. There were absurd wars like that with Mexico. At last the incapacity of the government and its incredible presumption brought upon the country the unparalleled disasters of 1870, involving the profoundest military humiliation, Germany unified by victory, and the amputation of two provinces.

The third attempt was in 1870, under the shock of these calamities. But even the France of 1870 was hardly prepared for a régime founded on liberty ; so that this third attempt also came near failing in the face of renewed attacks on the part of the royalists (1873). This danger, however, was averted, and little by little the republic settled solidly upon a definitive foundation. "As there was never any revolution in France except to establish a republic, there have been no revolutions since the republic has been in existence." The thirty years that have just gone by are the most peaceful of our history ; the country was never more quiet or prosperous than it is today.

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But while all these events were happening the face of the earth was changing. Considered apart, France of today is incomparably stronger from every point of view than the France of 1789; but, relatively, the opposite is true, because everything around her has grown—the proportions are no longer the same.

Under Louis XIV. the population of France represented forty per cent. of the total population of the great powers of Europe; in 1789, twenty-seven per cent.; in 1900, hardly ten per cent. In 1789 France was the most populous state; at the present time, from this point of view, she falls behind Russia, Germany, Great Britain, and Austria-Hungary. In 1789 she was the most homogeneous of European states, in fact, almost the only one unified; now almost all the European states are as well organized as she. The very effect of the Revolution was to create numerous national centers and to reduce France to the rank of one people among European peoples. Moreover, Europe as a whole has developed rivals. The field of transformation has been so wide that today the largest, the richest, and the most influential of civilized states is in North America. Still other powers are making their appearance beyond the United

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States, in the Pacific islands. The axis of the world is being shifted. In these days an historical advance of several centuries may be caught up in thirty years, as Japan has shown. And who would venture to lay claim, in the world such as it now is and promises to be, to a permanent leadership? There is no longer any military primacy possible among so many nations of equivalent strength.

No one nation can be first among all nations. The marvelous changes brought about in the nineteenth century in the distribution of social groups have made this primacy impossible, not only from the military point of view, but from every point of view. Who, or what people, would venture to lay claim in the present world to any sort of hegemony—intellectual, artistic, or scientific? There was a time when one need only know what was written in French; literary men of all countries are today informed about the masterpieces of all nations, even those of Russia and Scandinavia, and no one is satisfied with his own national literature alone. As for science, we realize nowadays that its pursuit is the collective work of humanity as a whole; all peoples are in collaboration, and in the common product it is hard to isolate and weigh the exact

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contribution made by each. No one can say, in the majority of scientific fields, to whom science owes the most — whether to the learned men of German, of English, or of French speech.

Frenchmen who have studied the history of their country, and who are acquainted with other countries, therefore put aside the dream — once fully realized but henceforward antiquated — of an exclusive and preponderant influence emanating from France in military, artistic, or scientific fields. They have good reasons for not indulging in this dream; but none the less they ask themselves what is destined to be, in the collective life of humanity, the rôle assigned to France, in the light of her past, by historical probability. Each of the great modern nations has its individual features which the centuries have developed and which must be respected. What, then, constitutes the individuality of France among modern nations? Here is precisely the question in which I intended the present address to culminate.

Recently, various solutions have been proposed in France, some of them diametrically opposed to others.

The author of a book entitled *La Patrie française, ses origines, sa grandeur et ses vicissitudes*



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—an author little known, but one who personifies and represents a school — writes: “The flag of France is distinguished from all others by the fact that it is always accompanied or preceded by the Cross. This cross is undeniably the symbol of the mission fulfilled on the earth by our country, and one which other nations would like to snatch from her.” This author believes that the essential and traditional rôle of France is that of eldest daughter and pillar of the church, the Catholic church: *Gesta Dei per Francos*.

Michelet, the head of another school, declares, on the other hand, that what is peculiar to France is that she has always sacrificed herself for “causes” of universal interest, for the liberty and welfare of mankind; she is “the most humane of nations, who alone, as history shows, possesses the genius of sacrifice.” Has she not given her blood to free the United States, Greece, Belgium, Poland, Italy? “In this country alone strength and ideality are at one, valor and right—two things disjoined the world over.” etc. To Michelet and to his generation the national traditions of France are the ideals of justice, liberty, equality, and solidarity; her “mission” is to propagate

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these principles among men; she is for all time "the champion of reason and fraternal equality, the soldier of right." "France," said Ernest Renan, "—that nation which performs disinterested acts for the benefit of the rest of the world." And another declares, in the same mood: "If France ever thought of giving up her disinterested, social, and humane spirit, she would lose without possible compensation what has always been the source of her moral power;" and: "The great reason for the powerful influence exerted by France on other nations has been that she has never ceased to concern herself with the destinies of mankind."

It is impossible to accept, in its entirety, either of these two theses.

The first belongs to an unimportant minority. It has been a long time since France appeared in the rôle of the champion of Catholicism. Pepin the Short, Godfrey of Bouillon, St. Louis, and even Napoleon III. as defender of pontifical Rome against Garibaldi, are far in the past. The real eldest daughter of the church, as all know, is Spain. It would even seem that France, historically speaking, is the nation which among the Catholic nations has played this part the least. But it is quite useless at this time to insist further on this point.

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The second thesis is very characteristic of the mid-nineteenth century. It is not entirely and radically false, for it cannot be doubted that the rationalistic and sentimental program of the Revolution was the crystallization of opinions which had been very popular for centuries. From this point of view it is true that the French tradition falls in very well with the humanitarian program of the Revolution. And it is true that the Revolution formulated definitely an ideal of liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice, and imposed it with a new vigor upon succeeding generations in France, even to the point of leading Frenchmen into chivalric interventions—often ill-managed and sometimes resented—in the affairs of others. But the error of Michelet and his following lay in believing in a quasi-providential and indefeasible “mission,” as if humanity were destined to remain always, so to speak, under the influence and ascendancy of that nation which was the first to open new highways into the future. We can easily see how they were led here into an exaggeration: they insisted, in an indirect way, on reserving for France a sort of primacy; a military or intellectual supremacy being excluded, they substituted a primacy of dominating and guiding

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forces in the direction of progress, enlightenment, and emancipation. We are better informed nowadays; we have learned that in the future such a primacy will be divided up like the others. All peoples have henceforward a universal rôle. As one of our orators has said: "they are like vessels, which, fitted with electric searchlights, and with prows directed toward the horizon of a better civilization, are sweeping the horizon with their lights. Who knows from which vessel, or from what people, will come the brightest signal, the most piercing ray?"

As a reaction against the usual insistence by the Catholic idealists and the revolutionary idealists upon identifying the destiny of France with "the genius for sacrifice"—sacrifice of the national interests to those of the church or to those of humanity—and under the stress of mistakes committed in the name of these theories, a new school has grown up since the formal establishment of the republic, which advocates the contrary policy of national egoism, a policy favoring business and colonial activity. "We have done enough for others, it is time to take thought for ourselves." Surely nothing could be more natural than this defensive movement,

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and, if it had always been guided by enlightened men, nothing perhaps could be wiser. But at the same time it is plain that nothing is more foreign to the careless and generous spirit of the nation. France hears the bourgeois virtues preached to her; but she has always acted the part of the *grand seigneur*.

Where, then, is that originality, the inheritance of a long past, which France is bound to respect and cultivate for her own good and that of others? Let us see. The French people (I mean now the majority of cultivated people in France) has always been very secular and very free in its thought; in France people began very soon to speak on any and all subjects without reserve and without prohibition; and this complete liberty, which contributes not a little to the life and ease of our literature, is yet, for many foreigners, the object of remark and of envy. The French mind and the French language, moreover, are generally credited with certain eminent qualities: precision, clearness, logic. Quite as much as her ancient ascendancy these qualities have won for France for centuries past her traditional rôle of mediator between the nations. If there has been in the modern world any parallel to the ancient univer-

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sality of Greek culture, it has been the diffusion of French culture among the intelligent classes of all countries. Thus it is that our French writers have been "the secretaries of the human mind"—in other words, they have excelled in the labor of sifting out what is precious or exquisite in foreign civilizations, with a view to enjoying it themselves and enabling the whole world to enjoy it. These are remarks which might easily be expanded; the subject is one worthy of reflection. Mankind surely has need of a mediator between its different groups, a nation where the new faith, which shall be at once rational and social, and which has not yet been put forward to replace the old decrepit beliefs, shall be worked out in an atmosphere of absolute intellectual liberty. It is true that I was reading lately a book of a German professor in which he predicts that this mediating nation will be Germany; and a book of an Italian professor who claims it will be Italy, the venerable *mater gentium*. And, by the way, why should not this nation be the United States, where all the races of the old continent have met and been fused? There is no doubt that each of the great peoples of the world has good reasons to destine this fine rôle to its own country. But if these

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are illusions, they are beneficent illusions ; let us keep them. It is a sign of the times that we shall now witness a competition for this pacific office of mediator. The future will decide. We shall see.

In any case, the people, whichever it may be, that shall perform the duties just mentioned must needs be a healthy, vigorous, and growing people. France then would be constrained to renounce her candidacy if it were true that she had fallen into a decline, as has recently been rumored. Depopulation, alcoholism, parasitism in government circles, and what not? Volumes have been written in France to discuss this question. A whole literature full of an enervating pessimism has appeared to uphold the affirmative. A newspaper sent a circular to persons of note to inquire as to their opinion. Some answered "Yes;" others, "No;" others, "Perhaps." An Englishman answered: "Surely France is decadent, since Frenchmen are found who ask such a question." Heaven knows it is not impossible that even a great and noble nation should fall one day into decadence: *Nil permanet sub sole*. Men have seen it happen. History records that strange decline of vitality that came upon Spain in the late sixteenth cen-

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tury and from which she has not recovered. But no one who knows France of today can convince himself that she is seriously ill. She has had attacks, at different times during the last twenty years, of malignant diseases which she has victoriously cast off—an evidence of a good constitution. On the material side, she has maintained her rank. One cannot know exactly, of course, what a modern military organization is worth until it is tested by a shock, and it is certainly true that “where a battalion is constituted in France, a regiment springs up in Germany, and an army corps in Russia;” but there are reasons for hoping that the French organization is what it ought to be, and numbers are not everything. We have seen and may see today certain well-organized states, active and firm on their feet even if diminutive in stature, who are commanding the respect of states of colossal size. Morally speaking, do you not believe that the world would lose something if tomorrow French authors should cease writing and French artists no longer express their conceptions of beauty?

It seems plain that what has made a few Frenchmen afraid of a possible decadence—a fear which is at present groundless—is simply



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the discomfort due to an uneasy and imperfect realization of the situation which I have endeavored to describe clearly in your presence to-day: the all-important fact that France, who in former days exerted a preponderant influence because of her historical position in advance of other nations, is today only one among many, *una inter pares*. "For thirty years now," exclaimed recently M. Jules Lemaitre, the well-known nationalist, "there has been no special pleasure in being a Frenchman!" It is quite natural that Frenchmen of the end of the nineteenth century should have had some difficulty in accustoming themselves to these new conditions which the general evolution of human societies has imposed rather rudely on their country. Hence this uneasiness, which is betrayed in some by exhibitions of excessive humility; in others, by outbursts of pride. But our eyes are now opened: we are proud—and why should we not be?—of a very glorious past; we rejoice in the attention which this past secures for us from nations whose future seems brighter than ours; and we are confident, lastly, that France will remain, by virtue of the sincerity of her efforts, one of the forces, one of the lights, and one of the graces of humankind.











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